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THE METAWIN SOCIETY OF THE BUNGEEES OR SWAMPY INDIANS OF LAKE WINNIPEG.

THE Indians found in the Dominion of Canada, between Norway House and York Factory, as well as those about the shores of Lake Winnipeg, are locally known as Bungees, or Swampy Indians, and are thought to be composed of Saulteaux and Cree, as their speech seems to be a mixture of the dialects of both of these tribes.

The most important of all the religious ceremonies conducted by these Indians many years ago was that of the Metawin, which was usually held in the spring. It belonged to a sort of secret society which had branches or "lodges," from Lake Superior to the far north, the head or original Metawin having been established in very ancient times. The sole aim of its ceremonial rites was to insure long life and success to all who obeyed its behests.

The chief Metawin Society still remains, and although its exact locality is not now known, certain individuals have power to establish subordinate lodges. The first subordinate lodge was established, it is claimed, somewhere in the vicinity of Lake Winnipeg many years ago, and its mysteries were ordained to be performed every alternate year forever. Subsequently this lodge was removed to some place near Lake Superior, and by its power was given to several tribes of Indians to establish branch lodges.

Each lodge had its Master of Ceremonies, a Grand Master of Medicine, as well as minor officers. Each member of the lodge had in his possession a "*bag of life*," made of the skin of any bird or small animal, such as the owl, mink, beaver, muskrat, and sometimes the snake, but whatever the skin from which it was made, the bag was always highly ornamented with beads or porcupine quills, and contained medicine considered conducive to long life, which was provided by the Grand Master of Medicine.

The structure in which the Metawin was held was built long and narrow, of upright saplings, carefully covered with brush and leaves so that no outsider could peep in and scan its mysteries. The door in all cases faced the rising sun. Down the middle of this structure several poles were planted upright in the ground, to support a cord or rope stretched from one end of the inclosure to the other. On this cord were suspended the offerings of those who had had a successful hunt during the past winter, and of those who had recovered from a dangerous sickness. There were there also the offerings of penitents, with which they hoped to atone for their misdeeds and transgressions during the year. These offerings consisted of various articles, such as pieces of printed calico, clothing, knives, guns, and ammunition.

In the centre of the structure, placed upon the ground, were wooden carvings of the goose, the fox, the duck, and other animals. At the foot of each upright central pole were images of various birds and animals ; while at one end of the structure, where the chief men sat, stood an image, made partly of wood and partly of clothing, which represented the god of medicine in human form.

The spectators of the proceedings in the lodge were seated close around the sides of the structure, sufficient space being left between the line of offerings and the assembly for the performance of the religious rites.

When a lodge was to be held, the Grand Master, in giving notice of the meeting, sent by the hands of a trusted messenger a piece of tobacco to each member of the lodge, with the request to meet at a certain time and place to celebrate the Metawin. After the meeting of the members the structure for the ceremonies was erected as above described. This being done, the members formed in line and, with the Grand Master and the Master of Ceremonies at their head, approached the structure on the east side, and then marched around it three times, following the course of the sun. At the end of the third time, the Grand Master halted opposite the entrance and advanced three times, essaying to enter, and three times retreated, singing as follows :—

I approach but fear
To be near thy presence.
Oh ! ah ! oh ! oh !

As he finished this chant, the Master of Ceremonies with a wand lifted up the covering of the door and the Grand Master entered, followed by all the members. He then chanted the following :—

I have entered. I have entered
Long life to gain, long life to gain.
Oh ! oh ! oh ! ah !

The members then marched around the inside of the structure three times, each in the costume of his society and each having in his hand his bag of skin containing a magic bead. They then took the seats allotted to them by the Master of Ceremonies, while the Grand Master took a position near the image of the god of medicine, with a drum in his hand. He tapped the drum three times, at each interval repeating the words, “Ne kan, ne kan, kannana, kenana.” He then proceeded to address the gathering in somewhat the following strain :—

“The Great Spirit who dwelleth in the heaven of heavens bless you all and send you long life.

“The white-haired man brings with him life, and has given me life, which I give to all my brothers and sisters. Our forefathers

left us this structure to teach our children, and your life depends upon the secrets of your own breasts. Prepare your magic beads and skins of the house of life in order to cast your beads on the sick and dying who may be placed before you to restore to life. Your magic beads shall pierce rocks, the spirits who preside over our secret councils shall bless your efforts to restore health and long life. The path of our ancestors teaching us the use of the countless herbs and roots growing in this, our world, will sing the song of enchantment, when each member will offer with gratitude to his teacher the offerings he may have brought with him to seek and receive long life."

The Grand Master having finished his speech, several others of the leading men addressed the meeting. The tenor of the speeches was about the same as that of the Grand Master, namely, to obey their superiors and use the medicines to be found in the world. The candidates for admission into the secrets of the lodge were seated with the women and children along the sides.

The speeches being ended, the members of the lodge marched around in a sort of jog trot several times, swinging their medicine bags and uttering a monotonous chant; while the drummers stationed at one end of the structure constantly kept up their playing. Suddenly the procession would come to a halt opposite one of the candidates: the Grand Master would whisper something in his ear and then throw his medicine bag at him, whereupon the candidate would drop down as if he had been shot. The members of the lodge would then gather around him in a kneeling posture and blow into his ears and mouth and shake their medicine bags over him, making at the same time a sort of queer rumbling noise. In a short time the candidate would open his eyes and gradually come to life, and in a few minutes was fully recovered. The march was then resumed, and the candidate would take up his medicine bag and follow the procession.

This was repeated over each candidate until all had been initiated.

After this ceremony was over, each member took the magic bead out of his bag of life, and, holding it in the palm of his hand, went around showing it to all the company, after which he fell upon his knees and appeared to swallow it. It is claimed that this bead was then drawn in a supernatural manner from the body of the performer and replaced in the bag unknown to him. After the rite had been gone through, the various offerings contributed were handed to the newly initiated candidates, who, in their turn, distributed them among the other members of the society. This being done, the members again marched around in a half trot, and pointed their medicine bags occasionally at each other. The person pointed at immediately

fell down as if struck by lightning, but soon recovered and got up and followed the others. On some occasions one seemed as if badly wounded and unable to get up. In such a case the others gathered around him and, with much ceremony, made a show of extracting a bead from his body. Sometimes a bag would be pointed at some one's knee, when he would instantly become lame, and with great difficulty hobble after the procession, but would gradually get better and finally resume his natural jog trot.

Many women were employed cooking outside, while others were engaged in looking after the nets, which were set in the river for sturgeon. Several dishes of dog-broth and dog-meat, as well as sturgeon, were set before the wooden images in the lodge house. These edibles were devoured by the society members when the rites were concluded.

S. C. Simms.